



UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

HISTORY WORKSHOP

STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF APARTHEID

6 - 10 February 1990

AUTHOR: Liz Host

TITLE: Voices from the Past : A Report on Riddles, Songs
and Tales from the South-western Cape

AFRICANA LIBRARY

This paper reflects an aspect of my oral research in the Malmesbury district of the south-western Cape. I first met my informants, Lukas and Koos in 1986 through Lukas' grandson with whom I worked on a wine-estate in Cape Town. As with all "gems", I stumbled upon these stories and riddles during the course of interviews with these two former farm workers, Lukas, about 93 and Koos, about 68 years of age, when they were talking about their working lives in the early years of this century. The riddles were first mentioned in the third interview, and on next meeting I asked them to tell me more about "die raaisels" (riddles). It was from that point that on, that I began to see how rich this material was and of course, the enjoyment of listening to an old man's stories, was not to be missed, nor once he had begun did I find myself as interested in dissecting the detail of farm work routine when I could be treated to entertainment of such delight and more importantly, get a closer look into the consciousness of people and touch, even if only slightly, a socio-cultural nerve. The riddles and later the stories also gave insights which contextualized and explained more vividly, the attitudes and perceptions which had been glimpsed in their recounting of working on a farm. Much I couldn't understand and/or explain, and much that I did not recognize as a "norm", became more tangible in the context of the stories I heard. Although still in its early stages, it is nevertheless important to draw attention to this material and perhaps worthwhile, to posit some suggestions concerning the "meaning" and the role the riddles, tales and songs played in people's lives.

The Riddles

The first reference made to riddles was while Lukas was telling me about punishment and relating how, "in die outyd" a man who was being taken to the magistrate's court was not carried there in a van (that I was told was

sheer luxury!), but was handcuffed to the bridle of the horse which either the policeman or the civilian who had arrested him, was riding. He made a slight reference to "die raaiselboekies" and I asked what they were. Very casually, he recommended I go to the local police-station and ask them to give me some. He was sure all the police-stations had them. It was after making fruitless enquiries of both police and a couple of farmers I was interviewing in the area, that I seriously began to see them as mythical creations in response to an increasingly harsh social environment. Lukas explained, in a subsequent interview, that riddles had a vital role to play in people's contact with the law. If a man was taken to court for having committed a crime, he had at his disposal, the only means to extricate himself from his predicament. Asking the magistrate a riddle was his only way out. If the magistrate could not find the answer to the riddle in any of his books and could not himself guess the riddle, then, I was told, the person went free.

Riddle 1 - English summary

A woman had been to court and been punished many times for various crimes. On this particular occasion she was given half a day to find a riddle which did not appear in the riddle-book kept at the magistrate's court. She met a man who told her to go to a particular farm on which there were a line of trees. She was instructed to go to the fourth where she would find a horse's head in which a mouse had made a nest and produced seven young mice. She had to take hold of all seven babies with one hand and kill them and leave them there. On returning to the magistrate, she gave the following riddle: "Wiedergaan en wederkom, uit 'n dooier, sewe lewe vyf maak sewe dooi?" Of course the magistrate could find this nowhere in his books and so he had to set her free.

There are various interesting points to be made about this riddle and the

others. The telling of the story of the incident varies with each riddle and storyteller. In examples like the one above, the method of procuring the riddle takes precedence over the interaction with the magistrate. We hear in other riddles much more detail devoted to the telling of the riddle by the defendant and the interaction between him/her and the magistrate. In this riddle the number "four" appears to be significant - it appears here as a representation of the "lucky" tree - in riddles of the second type, there is often a reference to 4 o'clock, the "lucky" time by which stage the magistrate was about to go home, he was in a hurry and wanted to conclude the cases for the day, so that the sense of urgency, facilitated the defendant's chances of having a riddle to which an answer could not be found. I think it should by now be fairly obvious that none of the riddles which I was told, were ever guessed by the authorities.

This brings me to a major role which I see as being played by "riddle-telling" in the lives of rural workers in the later decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of this century. If one can conceive of the reality of being a worker, descended in large part from the slave class, in the rural western Cape, having no access to literacy, and living and working a life in which desertion from work, failure to comply with your employer's wishes or the theft of a watermelon or sheep, was likely to land you in court where in most cases you would be given 7 to 14 days imprisonment usually with hard labour, a beating and 7 days to one year's imprisonment respectively, one can then very easily see how mythical mechanisms were created by people to explain away the incomprehensible and furthermore, and possibly as or more important, allow people albeit an imaginary one, a measure of control over their lives. Further insights into workers' perceptions of the law are offered by the riddles.

The fact that the law governed the working relationship meant that it loomed large in a worker's life. For example, the familiarity with legal consequence was evident when Lukas and Koos were talking about the punishments one was given as a result of desertion, drunkenness, murder. They spoke about 7 days or a month in jail, depending on the period of absence from work or the degree of drunkenness and for murder (which included infanticide) the penalty was life imprisonment. Furthermore, Koos and Lukas were familiar with both desertion and drunkenness and had experienced court procedure and imprisonment on more than one occasion - not unlike most other workers. Bearing in mind the frequency of breaking the law and facing for the most part fairly extreme sentences for apparently minor misdemeanours, (a characteristic of working life in South Africa which although it may have been harsher in the 19th century, was still very much a part of the lives of 20th century workers) these riddles would have constituted a major aspect of popular culture. The emphasis on the riddle procurement in riddles told me by Koos (about 68 years old) and those told me by Lukas (about 93 years of age) where the court procedure and interaction with the magistrate was given more emphasis, might be explained by their different generations. Lukas would remember those told him by his parents and grandparents while Koos' would be of a later period. Both informants were adamant that they themselves did not use riddles in court, but that "die outydse mense" did, since all these riddle-stories are purportedly true. Why then did they persevere even if only as stories of past "heroism"?

The origin of the riddles must be situated in a period, more likely at the beginning when everything was new, when local magistrate's and the Cape Town court was instituted. The magistrate's court was begun in the wake of emancipation and in the decades which followed, the work force was increasingly criminalised so that experience of the law and court

procedure was part of daily life - these riddles, then, besides being retained simply for entertainment, would very possibly, have been retained by people for whom real control over their lives was only a mythical dream. There is very little likelihood that these riddles originated or existed only amongst a certain group of workers or in Malmesbury alone - the experience was too common a feature of everybody's lives for only one group to have conceived of the mythical creation. What could be unique to Malmesbury, might be the content of the riddles. It is more likely that as with the wondertales, the content was farm-specific, but the idea general. A further indication of the period of origin can be gained from elements contained within the riddle, e.g. the mode of transport was either horses, or horse and cart. Does the fact that most riddles were given by men in courts of law, tell the historian anything about the male/female criminal ratio? On Malmesbury farms, there were, from 1830s right up to the 1930s, more male than female workers so it would seem logical to assume that since most of the cases in people's real experience were work-related, more men went to court than women. The fact that the examples of crimes in the riddles are fairly serious, e.g. murder perhaps gives us some insight into the perceptions of people - the idea of going to court for a small misdemeanour and receiving a comparatively heavy sentence was perhaps so strange as to make the idea of getting off a murder charge for giving a riddle which no-one could answer, plausible enough.

While it may be true that the riddles constituted part of a popular culture rooted in perhaps a distant past, the success of the weak over the powerful can be seen to still have held great relevance in the lives of workers in the earlier 20th century. I think it is telling that constant reference was made to the lack of the young peoples' knowledge, understanding and practice of telling the riddles, by Lukas and Koos. Could it be that they are too imaginative for late 20th century workers on

farms? Is the reality so harsh that no amount of imagination can create a mythical "way out"? Or has life become easier and the consciousness has no need to keep a grip on a halcyonic past?

The Songs

During one of my trips out to Malmesbury in 1987/88 I met and recorded a group of women who ranged in ages from about 30, the average age appearing to be about 50 years of age. The recording was a dismal failure in terms of clarity, sound etcetera and I have been unable to interview this particular group again. I was told that they constituted part of a group of women, apparently living on farms throughout the south-western Cape, who individually practise as, and are recognised by working communities as "digters". They are characterisitcally, women who have suffered great tragedy in their lives and their role appears to be as composers of songs for farm-working communities. They did not appear to be employed as workers, but rather it seemed as if the community saw to their welfare. It seemed that the only qualification for being a "digter" was the experience of a great tragedy in one's life which, as it was explained to me, equipped these women with a deep understanding of life necessary in order to compose songs for the community. Of all the songs, which were clear enough to understand, none contained any visible trace of humour in it. In terms of format all the songs were no longer than 3 lines, most being only two lines in length. The following examples relate to the workplace and the farmer/worker relationship, which from what I could understand, was the focus of all their compositions.

"Ek werk vir kleinbaas Bertie
Maar ek weet waaroor/waarom"
(I work for young master Bertie)
(But I know what it's about/ why)

"Drie druppe bloed
Drie druppe bloed
Snaar't hulle gekry"

(Three drops of blood x2)
(They had a difficult life)

These songs show a present-day popular response to life although "digters" have apparently been a part of the community for a long time. I could not establish when and why the role had been taken by or given to women in the community. The interesting link between these tragic songs and the songs I heard from Koos, was that although their content and usage were different, they had exactly the same format, tune and method of singing. Both types of song were only two or three lines in length and both were sung unaccompanied in the same or similar tune. It is very likely that the singing was accompanied by musical instruments such as the guitar, the squash-box and various other instruments some of which probably came with the slaves to the Cape. (See O. Mentzel, Descriptions of the Cape, vol.III, 1787, 1944, pp.305-307). Koos' songs were used as punctuations between stories and/ or riddles e.g.

*"Fluit fluit my ou storie is uit
Goue ??? die ander een begin (???= indistinct)
Kalf kalf, die kleintjie is half."*

Does the existence of the "digter" in present-day Malmesbury district have its origins in societies from which slaves came? I was given to understand that the digters themselves compose the songs, evidence of which I had when I met that particular group of women. However, are most of the songs ones which have been passed down the generations containing minor changes? It would seem logical to assume that the format (two-line all sung in the same way) of the songs would have originated with those sung by people while telling stories. The song is the medium now used, and most probably one which has always been used, by people on farms, to give some meaning to their working existence.

The Wonder Tale

This form of story -telling was interesting, in that in more ways than the

riddles and songs, the wonder-tale seems to be rooted in a wider universal consciousness. I have called the stories which were related to me during interviews with Koos and Lukas, "wonder-tales" because they are, in terms of format, composition, plot and structure, very similar to Russian and other wonder-tales. (See, V. Propp) After an English summary of one of the wonder-tales I would like to give some comparative insights into the format, composition and plot.

Wonder-tales - English summary

A young boy goes off on a journey. On the way he meets an old woman at a dam - he refuses to give her bread so does not receive any water. He continues and arrives at a farm where he is employed to look after the rabbits. He loses some and as a result is murdered in his bed by the farmer. Meanwhile his younger brother has become concerned about the fate of his brother. He too sets off on a journey and also meets the woman at the dam. However he gives her bread and she gives him water and a whistle with instructions to blow it once he reaches the anthills, which are close to the farm where his brother went to work. He arrives, follows the instructions and is employed by the farmer to watch his rabbits. From the beginning he brings home more than his quota of rabbits in the evening which pleases the farmer and he continues to live on the farm. During his stay at the farm he falls in love with the daughter and beds her. The farmer is all set to kill him, but the night on which he is to commit the murder, the young boy flees with the daughter, and packs his bed with wood. The farmer takes an axe to the "body" in the bed and "kills" it, only to be told by his wife that he has killed wood and that the two have fled. He leaves home to find them. First he meets a couple along the road who he questions about his daughter and the worker - they feign ignorance and he returns home despondent, only to be told by his wife that he had spoken with them. He returns, to find that the house/hotel and the dam he

had seen previously have disappeared. He continues on but fails to gain any insight into his daughter's whereabouts. On all his expeditions to find them, they are aware of him on their trail. They throw a bottle of mountain water into his path and create a mountain in order to block his path. Eventually, the daughter who has been warning the young man not to look behind him, reveals that she wants to hear her father's age and then she will be happy. They throw a bottle of sea-water in his path and he walks into the sea, saying he has reached the age of 48, but he has never walked through such deep water before. On hearing his age, the daughter is satisfied. The father by now just wants the water to take him in, but it keeps bringing him back and he eventually returns home and abandons the search for his daughter, or as in another version heard in a later interview, he drowns.

While the summary probably does not carry the detail of the original tale, there is sufficient here for the reader to recognize the comparative aspects of the western Cape and Russian wondertales, which I shall briefly discuss now. In terms of format, both types are very similar. A misfortune occurs, the hero is asked to help, he sets off, on the way he meets someone who puts him to the test and rewards him with a magic tool. With its help he finds the sought-for object, returns and is rewarded. In the case of our wondertale, the hero does not appear to return to his home but is rewarded with the daughter. The initial misfortune occurs at the beginning of the tale. In this wondertale, it is the second brother, the true hero, who accomplishes the victory, whereas in the Russian wondertales examined by Propp, the first hero succeeded and the second, false one, failed. Elements contained in all wondertales are also found in these tales. There is a reproach linked with an enquiry (the encounter of both boys with the old woman); hospitality features (the exchange here of water but can also be bread); the mistress of the fields, rivers, lakes,

in our case she was the mistress of the dam. In most cases a description of her outward appearance is absent but in our tale, we are told she is old, riddled with lice and neglected.

The second hero passes the test and is rewarded with a magic tool (in this case the whistle), which enables him to increase the number of rabbits he is looking after, thereby ensuring a long period on the farm during which time he meets and falls in love with the daughter of the farmer. This, coupled with the confirmation of his brother's fate, is ultimately his reward. Categorising them as wondertales perhaps explains them more precisely if one uses Propp's definition of wondertale as being a distortion of reality.

There are numerous elements of this tale which could have some bearing on the origin of the tale and tell us something about popular perceptions of power and the universal belief or hope of the weak overcoming the strong and powerful. If one looks at the references to time it is apparent that they all pre-date capitalist, clock-time. (references to dusk, daybreak, after midday, but not one example of an "o'clock". This would seem to suggest that the tale had its origins well before time was perceived in hours and minutes. Of course, this could also be related to the rural working world - the farm was organised, not around clocks, but natural day and seasonal breaks.

Again, as with the riddles, the number four and multiples of four, appear in the story. The first brother had to care for twenty-four rabbits, the younger brother was instructed to blow his whistle at the fourth ant-hill. He had 42 rabbits to care for. The father was 48 years old.

The girl is referred to as "'n dogtertjie" (a daughter) until it has

become clear that she is remaining with the young man - she is then referred to as "n kleinmeid" (a derogatory term used to refer to young coloured girls). It is interesting that her father continues to ask about a daughter, but the narrator when referring to her, uses the above term. Does this say something about popular perceptions of race? By going off with "die klong" (young coloured boy) is she perceived as losing her white status, rather than sharing or giving the young man her status?

It is always the women in the story who are the wise ones - the daughter is the one who plans part of the getaway and it is the mother who keeps recognizing when her husband has been duped by the couple. It is the young girl who has access to and uses the bottle of mountain and sea - water, who conceives the idea and is able to create the obstacles. Were women perceived as being more stable and mentally, more agile, than men?

On first investigation, the wondertale appears to have originated in a much earlier period, suggested by the existence of so many universal images and symbols within the tale. It is important to note though, that the tales which I have recorded so far, also contain elements which appear to be derived from a world in which people were employed by a ruling class which was firmly established in the countryside. You will note that in the example given, the young boy leaves home and is employed by a white farmer, referred to as "die baas" quite clearly specific to South African society. This tale also has very strong similarities with the "Bre'r Rabbit Tales" from the American South a major characteristic of which, is the victory of the weak and powerless over the strong and powerful.

The tales also appear to contain a strong moral message, not obviously biblical, although one could possibly draw links - if one looks at the example given there are elements of morality - the fact that the father

either loses, or nearly loses his life in the sea at the end of the story - was this a natural justice? I have heard this tale at two different times - the first time the father was trying to get out of the water but the sea would not allow his escape and he drowned. The second time I heard part of this story in the middle of another tale - the beginning was different but from the scene of the woman at the dam including her description, till the point where the sea is created were identical (the pauses, the descriptions and the events). At the end of the story though, the father returns home and ceases his quest for his daughter. If one is to assume that these tales do contain moral teaching, the next question, is surely, whose morality? Is it the master's Christian or a slave/worker morality? If it is the latter, it together with the riddles could be considered, as was the case with American slaves on plantations, a vehicle for a "private" slave/worker morality, which equipped workers with some measure of control over their world. As was mentioned earlier, contained within the Russian wondertale are examples of the woman-magic-tool-giver being transformed into an angel, which has strong Christian connotations. However, in these Malmesbury tales, no such transformation takes place and neither are there any specifically Christian symbols in the tale. This evidence would tend to support the argument that these tales are essentially an expression of rural underclass morality and do not contain original elements of Christianity.

The example of rabbits in the tale, is a strange one, since it was not common practice to keep rabbits, that is, as stock. Is this example used in the tale to denote something deeper than just giving the farmer "stock"? Rabbits were focal animals in the Bre'r Rabbit tales - it is tempting to believe that the rabbit has the same or very similar symbolism in Malmesbury tales. There is a major difference though. The rabbits in

our wondertale play no active role in the tale - in fact their only function appears to be that of multiplying in response to the magic held by the second boy who was given the "blaas fluitjie". I am sure the increase of the rabbits was not due to natural breeding, although the hero was there long enough (six months) for the number to increase. It was on his first night that he brought home extra rabbits. In the other version of this tale, the young boy blows the whistle at the end of his first day and all the rabbits return with him to the farm after having been missing all day. Again, one recognizes the universal line of animal responses to instruments which themselves may contain magical powers or which are used by people with magical control - the most obvious example which comes to mind being the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

The main purpose of this "paper" was to let you hear the voices of the past and enter, even if only for a brief moment, the rural world of the late 19th and early 20th century in Malmesbury. I hope that has been achieved. Lukas is now in his nineties is very frail and in frequent conversation with God in preparation for his death, he tells me. When I last saw him, I was reminded of that wonderful line in the film, "Rabette's Feast" and know that he will most assuredly delight the angels.

References

1. Interviews conducted from October 1986 by Liz Host.
2. Malmesbury Criminal Records, Cape Archives, 1/MBY, 1/1/1 to 1/1/54.
3. Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale, tr. Laurence Scott. Austin: Univ. Texas Press, 1968.